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CHARLES MÉRYON

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CHARLES MÉRYON

PORTRAIT OF
CHARLES MÉRYON 1853

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CHARLES MÉRYON

A COLLECTION OF ETCHINGS AND DRAWINGS

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CHARLES MÉRYON

FOR more than a hundred and fifty years after the death of Rembrandt, the art of original etching was neglected. Except in Italy, whose best work was produced during the eighteenth century, the etching needle was used but rarely for its own sake, and chiefly as a help and support to reproductive engraving. Then, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, came a reaction. Not only a revival of etching itself, but a renewed understanding of the medium and a practical application of the best traditions of the art.

The most active part in fostering the new movement was undoubtedly played by the French landscape painters, especially men of the Barbizon School—Rousseau, Jacque, Daubigny, and Corot—men whose names are associated with the best landscape etchings of the time. But if Barbizon was the center of the revival, Paris was the inspiration of the greatest of French etchers, Charles Méryon.

"The case of Charles Méryon," wrote Hamerton, "is one of those painful ones which recur in every generation to prove the fallibility of the popular judgment. Méryon was one of the greatest and most original artists who have appeared in Europe; he is one of the immortals; his name will be inscribed on the noble roll where Dürer and Rembrandt live forever. He was sorely tried by public and national indifference, and in a moment of bitter discouragement he destroyed the most magnificent series of his plates." Born in 1821, the natural son of Charles Lewis Méryon, an English physician of old Huguenot stock, and Pierre Narcisse Chaspoux, a French dancer, he spent his childhood with his mother, whom Burty describes as intelligent and gentle, "bestowing upon her son the most ardent affection, and watching over his early years with unceasing care."

At the age of five he was placed in a school at Passy. How long he remained there we do not know, but even as a child, Méryon's life could not have been a happy one. Endowed with a highly

strung, nervous organism, from which he suffered all his life, his melancholy and timidity are said to have dated from the shock he received when told the true facts of his birth. There is little doubt, however, his mental disease was hereditary.

In 1837, having obtained his mother's consent, Méryon entered the French naval school at Brest, and in 1839 made his first voyage as midshipman, bound for the north coast of Africa and the Levant. He had had some elementary instruction in drawing while at Passy, and during this journey and the longer one to follow, he made a number of small pencil sketches, a few of which he used later for some of his less important etchings. On his return to France, he began to study with Cordouan, a painter of landscape. Meanwhile, his mother had died, and in 1842 Méryon received his commission in the navy and was sent aboard the corvette *Le Rhin*, which had been ordered on a long cruise in the Pacific to protect French commerce, and perhaps to explore and to make scientific observations.

The prolonged cruise ended, and Méryon returned to France, resigning from the navy in 1846, either on account of ill health, or because a cumulative artistic instinct made further service distasteful to him. He now decided to devote all his time to the study of art, and in Paris he received further instruction from Monsieur Phelippes, an old pupil of David; but finding the career of a painter closed to him by reason of his color blindness, he entered the atelier of Eugène Bléry, the engraver, and in a remarkably short time—six months it is said—learned all the technical resources of the art of etching. In 1849, he began by copying portraits, and the etched work of Loutherbourg, Karel du Jardin, H. van de Velde and Zeeman. He imitated the style of Zeeman exactly, and it characterises the whole of the early portion of his work. It was while copying Zeeman's *Pavilion of Mademoiselle, and a Part of the Louvre*, he conceived the idea of a series of etchings devoted to the city he loved so well.

At the age of twenty-nine, he left the

studio of M. Bléry to take humble rooms in the Rue Saint-Etienne-du-Mont, and to live, if possible, by the steady pursuit of his art. Between the years 1851 and 1854 appeared the Paris etchings—twelve views, "on" and not "of" Paris, (the distinction is Méryon's), beginning with *Le Stryge* and ending with *L'Abside de Notre-Dame*; many of them among the great classics of art, commemorating the beautiful and picturesque old buildings, fast disappearing under the drastic renovations of the Second Empire. In these wonderful pictures, masterly in drawing and etching, so exquisitely printed upon papers specially chosen to suit the peculiar qualities of each plate, Méryon has given us a sombre and impressive vision of the very spirit of Paris.

"Méryon possessed that imagination, that personal quality," says Wedmore, "joined to manual dexterity, likewise unsurpassed, which makes his etched work the greatest and most profoundly personal of any done since Rembrandt." Méryon's technique was adapted perfectly to the themes he dealt with and to

the mental impression he sought to produce, and yet, as Seymour Haden has said, "he was neither an etcher nor engraver *pur et simple*." In none of his important plates, with the possible exception of *La Rue des Mauvais Garçons*, is there any obvious spontaneity or suggestion of the freely etched line. He drew on the copper plate with the infinite care and patience of Albert Dürer, yet unity of effect was never lost by crowding, or too careful elaboration. His manner of making preparatory sketches for his architectural views of Paris was peculiar. He rarely completed his sketch on the spot, or was satisfied with only one drawing. He was accustomed to make a number of sketches on small pieces of paper, very careful and exact studies of detail, drawn with a hard pencil, working from the bottom upwards, a reversal of the usual order. Later, in his room, these small sketches were pasted together, bit by bit, making a complete, harmonious drawing, which in turn was drawn and etched into the copper plate.

Poet, as well as artist, Méryon pub-

lished some of his Paris views with explanatory verse in etched script. These little poems, sometimes ironic, sometimes playful, he placed beneath the subject itself, or etched on another plate interposed between two etchings in the series. "A distinct autobiographic interest attaches to these poems," says Mr. William Aspenwall Bradley in his delightful essay, *Charles Mèryon, Poet*, "which not only mirrors his emotional moods, but reflects some of the outward vicissitudes of his adventurous and unhappy life."

But these visions of old Paris, upon which Méryon's fame as an etcher rests, at first were scarcely noticed by the public or the dealers, and it was with difficulty he could find a purchaser of the prints now so precious. A franc and a half for "L'Abside", and for the modest sum of thirty francs one could have bought the whole Paris set. With means of the smallest, and livelihood precarious, small wonder that, in the face of hunger and discouragement, his peculiar malady began to assert itself. He grew daily more morbidly sensitive and irritable,

refusing every effort on the part of his friends to help him. His whole world became an object for suspicion. During this period of gloom he etched the mysterious *Rue des Mauvais Garçons*, with the following lines bitten into the copper: "What mortal lived in this sombre dwelling? Who hid in the shadow and the night? Was it Virtue, poor and silent, or was it Crime, a vicious soul? I am ignorant. If you, curious being, wish to know, go see. There is yet time." This etching was a favorite with the poet Baudelaire, who was anxious to help him, as were the etchers Flameng and Bracquemond, among others, but all to no purpose. Finally Méryon's work began to show the results of a weakened mind, and in May, 1858, he was taken by friends to the asylum at Charenton, Saint Maurice. With proper care and nourishment his mental and physical state improved gradually, and after fifteen months he was permitted to return to Paris. New plates were begun; etchings of the city, chiefly after old drawings, together with portraits and less important work. His

prints became better known, and thoughtful friends were ready to offer help in various ways; but the cure was not permanent. At the close of the year 1866 it was again necessary to confine Méryon at Charenton, where he remained until his death. February 14, 1868, marked the passing of the most vigorous and poetic of modern etchers. "As a painter he was a failure," says Mr. Hugh Stokes, "as an etcher he was unnoticed, save by the few persons who knew him personally. His existence was one of those lives of prolonged misery and unhappiness which occur so often in art biography. Méryon deprecated the value of his own work. Yet there must have been moments, when, gazing at his *Abside*, *Notre-Dame*, or *La Galerie de Notre-Dame* he knew that his genius had given imperishable treasures to the world."

CHARLES MÉRYON

ETCHINGS

The Initials L. D. refer to M. Loys Delteil, whose Charles Méryon, Le Peintre-Graveurs Illustré, volume II, *is now the standard book of reference.*

1 Passagers de Calais à Flessingue

First State *L. D. No. 16*

Reversed copy of an etching by R. Zeeman, published about 1650.

2 Le Stryge, Notre-Dame

Seventh State *L. D. No. 23*

The tower is St. Jacques, the distant hill, Montmartre.

"In the winter of 1861–62," says Monsieur Andrieux, "Madam Max Valrey introduced me to Méryon. Taking up the etching which did not then bear the name of *Le Stryge*, Méryon said to me, 'You can't tell me why my comrades, who know their work better than I do, fail with the Tower of St. Jacques. It is because the modern square is the principal thing for them, and the middle age Tower an accident. But if they saw, as I see, an enemy behind each battlement and arms through each loophole; if they expected, as

I do, to have the boiling oil and the molten lead poured down on them, they would do far finer things than I can do. For often I have to patch my plate so much that I ought indeed to be a tinker. My comrades,' added he—striking the *Stryge*, 'my comrades are sensible fellows. They are never haunted by this monster.' 'What monster?' I asked, and seeing the reproachful look, I corrected myself, 'or, rather, what does this monster mean?' 'The Monster is mine and that of the men who built this Tower of St. Jacques. He means stupidity, cruelty, lust, hypocrisy,—they all have met in that one beast.'"—Frederick Wedmore, *Méryon and Méryon's Paris.*

3 Le Petit Pont

Second State *L. D. No. 24*

Proof dedicated in pencil by Méryon to M. Robet.

"In his etchings of Paris the very stones seem to breathe. Paris is not a town, said D'Hérisson, years ago. It is a living being, with moments of fury, folly, stupidity, enthusiasm, honesty, purity."—Hugh Stokes, *Charles Méryon.*

4 L'Arche du Pont Notre-Dame

Third State *L. D. No. 25*

LA GALERIE DE NOTRE-DAME

"He made that magnificent plate—the most masterly of all from a technical point of view—*L'Arche du Pont Notre-Dame.*"

—William Aspenwall Bradley.

"Under the arch of Le Pont Notre-Dame, a woman's figure, standing, brooding nobly, is set well against the weird activity of the lithe figure slung in the rope."

—Frederick Wedmore, *Méryon and Méryon's Paris.*

5 La Galerie de Notre-Dame

Third State *L. D. No. 26*

"His finest work, for quality of reflected light, is the *Galerie de Notre-Dame.*"

—Philippe Burty, *Charles Méryon.*

"These last two above all" (The *Rue Pirouette* and the *Rue des Chantres*) "are beautiful plates, but they are far from having, whatever may be claimed for them, the splendid austerity, the admirable balance, of the *Petit Pont*, the *Morgue*, the *Galerie de Notre-Dame*, or the *Abside.*"

—Loys Delteil, *Charles Méryon.*

6 La Rue des Mauvais Garçons

Third State *L. D. No. 27*

"The one lyric note of the Rue des Mauvais Garçons, for instance, is in its own way as complete

a thing as is the magnificent epic of *Abside* or *Morgue.*"—Frederick Wedmore, *Fine Prints.*

"The *Rue des Mauvais Garçons*, with its gaunt house lines, its barred windows, its darkly shadowed portal, and deserted ways—its narrow pavements, along which two lonely figures hurry, and 'gather garments round them, pass nor pry'—has its companion in the *Morgue.*"—Frederick Wedmore, *Méryon and Méryon's Paris.*

7 La Tour de l'Horloge

Fourth State *L. D. No. 28*

"But the beginning and the end of his art, so far as the world can be asked to be seriously concerned with it, lay in the imaginative record, now faithfully simple, now transfigured and visionary, of the city which requited him but ill for his devotion to its most poetic and its most prosaic features."—Frederick Wedmore, *Fine Prints.*

8 The Same

Eighth State *L. D. No. 28*

"*La Tour de l'Horloge*, a magnificent piece of drawing, was perfect as a composition until he broke it up with long shafts of streaming light." (These beams first appeared in the seventh state).
—Hugh Stokes, *Charles Méryon.*

SAINT-ETIENNE-DU-MONT

9 Tourelle de la Rue de la Tixéranderie

Second State *L. D. No. 29*

"Considered psychologically, the work of Méryon is highly curious. It is thoughtful, reflecting, intensely personal, and full of strange hints of a passionate fantasy, secret and subdued."

—P. G. Hamerton, *Etchings and Etchers.*

10 Saint-Etienne-du-Mont

Fourth State *L. D. No. 30*

"Méryon expresses the oppressive sense of crowds not by drawing a crowd, but by gaping windows and the walls that cage them in, by thronged atmosphere and haunted spaces."—E. M.

11 La Pompe Notre-Dame

Seventh State *L. D. No. 31*

"But he had not only the sense of the picturesque and the characteristic; he had the sense of construction. Take the *Pomp*—the engine house by the river—and its scaffolding, beam crossed by beam. Here his pleasure in constructive work, however humble, is shown by his close and careful following of the wood work to its darkest and furtherest recesses."—Frederick Wedmore, *Méryon and Méryon's Paris.*

12 La Petite Pompe

Second State *L. D. No. 32*

"Presently the collector of the 'Paris Set' will legitimately want the smaller pieces; all are commentaries and connecting links. They bind together, almost as an appropriate text itself might bind together, what might otherwise be detached pictures. They complete the thought of Méryon in regard to his 'Paris', and make its expression clear. . . . . And to name one little print, but not to exhaust the list, there is a graceful embodiment of wayward fancy to accompany the *Pompe Notre-Dame.* It is called the *Petite Pompe*—represents the Pompe in small; gives us verses regretting the removal of so familiar a landmark, and surrounds all with a flowing border of rare elegance and simple invention."

—Frederick Wedmore, *Fine Prints.*

"Among the many monuments doomed to disappear was the old Pompe Notre-Dame on which Méryon composed the following verse, entitled *La Petite Pompe.* Set in a very clever and amusingly Bacchic border which seems to exude drunkenness in every line, this little conceit has been well characterized by one writer as an 'elegant and witty fantasy.' "

You've served your day,
Lackaday!
Poor old pump,
Shorn of your pomp,

TOURELLE DE LA RUE DE LA TIXÉRANDERIE

You now must die!
But to mollify
This iniquitous decree
By a bacchic pleasantry
Why, pump, do not you,
Quite impromptu,
Instead of water pure,
No folks can endure,
Pump wine,
Very fine?
—William Aspenwall Bradley,
Charles Méryon, Poet.

13 Le Pont-Neuf

Seventh State *L. D. No. 33*

"He had great subtlety and delicacy of observation, and a perception of truth so clear that it is strange how such bright insight can be compatible with any cloud or malady of the mind."
—P. G. Hamerton, *Etchings and Etchers.*

14 Le Pont-au-Change

Tenth State, according to Loys Delteil, but really the Eleventh State, as there was an undescribed intermediate proof in the MacGeorge Collection. *L. D. No. 34*

"The most beautiful in effect of sky is the *Pont-au-Change.*"—Philippe Burty, *Charles Méryon.*

15 La Morgue

Fourth State *L. D. No. 36*

With verses, entitled *L' Hotellerie de la Mort;* intended to accompany the subject, printed on same paper with the etching. Unusual, if not unique.

The old Morgue of Méryon's day—the "Doric little Morgue" of Mr. Browning, as seen from the quay-side.

"This print is, in our opinion, the most precious piece of the entire series; the genius of the immortal artist here reveals itself in its immortal power, its inimitable magic."—Gustave Bourcard, *A Travers au cinq siécles des Gravures.*

16 L'Abside, Notre-Dame de Paris

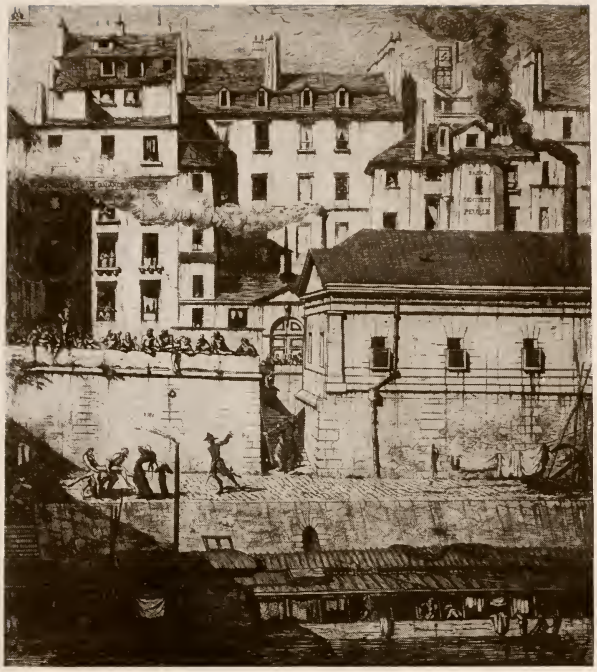
Seventh State *L. D. No. 38*

"The *Abside* is accounted the masterpiece of Méryon, by right of its peculiar majestic composition and its solemn and austere beauty." Frederick Wedmore, *Méryon and Méryon's Paris.*

17 Rue Pirouette aux Halles, 1860

Second State *L. D. No. 49*

Méryon used the burin in this plate to a considerable degree—the copper is in existence.



LA MORGUE

18 Partie de la Cité vers la Fin du XVIIe Siècle

Seventh State *L. D. No. 51*

View of the left bank of the Seine between the Pont Notre-Dame and the Pont-au-Change, after a drawing by an unknown artist.

"This etching," says Burty, "afforded to Méryon's friends one of the most convincing proofs of his unfortunate malady. In spite of their counsels, and of the advice of Bonnardot, who wished him to keep to the original design, Méryon pretended that the towers of Notre-Dame, and the chimneys of the houses, had been effaced in the original drawing by evil-disposed persons, and he insisted on placing them in his etching; thus transgressing historical accuracy with a persistency which could leave no doubt in any one's mind as to his mental condition."

19 Vue de l'ancien Louvre du Côté de la Seine

Fifth State *L. D. No. 53*

After a Painting by R. Zeeman

Two years before his death, Méryon received a commission from the French government to etch this plate. The copper is in the Galerie de la Calcographie Nationale at the Louvre.

20 La Rue des Toiles, à Bourges

Fifth State *L. D. No. 55*

This beautiful etching was refused at the Salon of 1853.

21 Ancienne Habitation à Bourges

Fourth State *L. D. No. 56*

"I like this plate; the subject has interested me because of the originality of its construction and the exactitude with which I have reproduced it."
—Méryon, *Mes observations*. . . . .

22 Océanie, Pêche aux Palmes

Fourth State *L. D. No. 68*

"Perhaps the most picturesque record of what Méryon saw in foreign parts. It has something of the sentiment of *Le Pilote de Tonga*, the sailor's joy in free waters and the great air."—Frederick Wedmore, *Méryon and Méryon's Paris*.

23 Portrait of Cassimir Le Conte

Second State *L. D. No. 77*

"The initials 'G. B.' are those of the painter Gustave Boulanger. The etching is a facsimile of his drawing."—Philippe Burty.

24 L'Arche du Pont Notre-Dame

See No. 5 of this catalogue

Preliminary sketch, before the finished drawing.

"On the whole, it seems to us that, wonderful as it is, the finished drawing, to which the etching itself corresponds absolutely, is less impressive architecturally, than the preliminary sketch."

—William Aspenwall Bradley.

25 Tourelle de la Rue de la Tixéranderie

See No. 9 of this catalogue

Preliminary sketch, before the finished drawing.

26 Rue Pirouette aux Halles, 1860

See No. 23 of this catalogue

Drawing after Laurence

We are told the drawing by Laurence was a very bad one, and that the animation is entirely Méryon's.

Speaking of Méryon's finished drawings, "their beauty and delicacy are such that their immediate

effect is to make the finest impressions of the etchings look a little coarse, hard, heavy. But if Méryon's conceptions lost something in one way, through being transferred to the copper, they gained immeasurably in another. Beautiful as they are, the drawings have little of the romantic, imaginative feeling of the etchings. The etched line, with its comparative coarseness, bluntness, and directness, could alone interpret the mood of the artist, steeped in deepest gloom and shot through with lurid gleams of impending madness, so that the more one studies Méryon's drawings, the more one becomes convinced that his compositions would have lacked an essential element of that greatness which they have as etchings, had they been worked out in any other medium."

—William Aspenwall Bradley.

DRAWINGS

PORTRAITS

27 Portrait of Charles Méryon, 1853

Heliogravure from the portrait by Félix Bracquemond. Etched from life.

"Le sombre Méryon au grotesque visage," as he subscribed himself under Bracquemond's etched portrait, head in profile.

28 Portrait of Charles Méryon

Original lithograph by an unknown artist—head and shoulders; probably copied from the Flameng drawing.

See No. 29 of this catalogue

29 Charles Méryon, 1858

Facsimile of the charcoal drawing made by Flameng while Méryon was in the hospital at Charenton. Flameng has stated that as he proceeded with the drawing Méryon become more and more excited until he (Flameng) had to make a speedy exit.

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